

Riverfront Park's cleanup timeline in question

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By Canda Harbaugh, The Western News |

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The fall timeline to remove contaminated soil and develop an expanded Riverfront Park at the former export plant site in Libby may be slipping away.

The Libby City Council and Environmental Protection Agency officials have not yet cemented a cleanup plan since serious discussions began in July.

At a meeting last week with EPA officials, the mayor and council expressed that they would need a breakdown of costs before deciding which option would be most beneficial, and some didn't believe that there would be enough time left to carry out the plan by winter.

"This is stuff we discussed two months ago," councilmember D.C. Orr said. "I'm worried that we're going to be pressured into doing this project this fall."

Councilmember Bill Bischoff agreed.

"I don't want to be rushed into making a decision," he said. "I want to see all the figures and I don't really see it getting done this fall either."

Mike Cirian, EPA's Libby field leader, offered that it would only take three to four weeks to perform a removal and lay down a clean cover until the city decides how it would like to proceed. Rebecca Thomas, EPA project manager for the site, echoed those comments.

"I appreciate what you're saying about the time, though I hesitate to have this property in its current condition next spring and summer when people start to use the park again," she said. "It would be nice to be able to have it at least in a clean condition, if not a fully-restored condition."

Thomas sent the council a letter two weeks ago explaining two basic options that would fulfill the selected remedy laid out in the record of decision.

The first choice calls for the EPA using a combination of cut and fill to leave a minimum of 18 inches of clean fill, or the equivalent, such as 12 inches and a cement sidewalk. The agency would perform remediation work that would correspond with the city's future plans for the site as a park, such as laying gravel for roadways, cleaning out a utility corridor and hydroseeding planned grassy areas.

The second option entails that the EPA perform enough cut and fill to break the exposure pathway, and then allow the city to carry out its own restoration using funds that the EPA saved by not performing the work.

"EPA could cut and fill, do at least 12 inches, then turn it over to the city with an amount in an escrow account for final restoration," Thomas explained.

The EPA's preliminary estimate for the cost of restoration is \$290,000, with an additional \$15,000 for design-related expenses to ensure quality drainage and long-term protection of the cover. The mayor and council agreed that they would not make a decision until they knew how the EPA reached that figure.

"If the city council is going to consider that as an option," said Allen Payne, the city's legal representation, "we have to figure out if we agree with those assumptions."

The council had discussed with the EPA at prior meetings the possibility of the city building up the property on one side to place a 1-percent incline over the whole area. The move would provide good drainage and several more inches of cover over much of the park. The council would like to see numbers, however, to determine which plan would be more cost-effective – the city building up the property or the EPA

performing its 18-inch cut-and-fill job.

“We’ve asked for the difference of you cleaning the site all completely done – how much that would cost you versus this idea of removal of a little bit of it and us filling it with a big amount,” Mayor Doug Roll said.

It is possible, both sides agreed, that the city may be able to lay down three feet of clean fill for what it costs EPA to do 18 inches.

“Obviously, the money will go a lot further for the city than it would go for EPA because of the cost of our contract, the Davis-Bacon wages, and all that,” Thomas said.

City and EPA officials planned to speak again via conference call this Tuesday evening.

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